

Experts assess states' case in lawsuit against Meta over youth mental health concerns

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Credit: Pexels

Meta, the parent company of social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp and Threads, faces federal lawsuits from 42 states' attorneys general asserting that the company intentionally crafted features to make children and teens become addicted to their products.

The states have also accused Meta of unlawfully collecting children's personal data without parental permission. Meta has denied the claims, stating that the company works to make its [social media platforms](#) safer for youth.

Virginia Tech experts Mike Horning, a researcher who studies that way that social [media](#) algorithms impact individuals, and Donna Wertalik, an authority on internet privacy issues and social media effects on teens, offered their perspectives on what the lawsuits mean for social media companies and users.

A health crisis exists for children and families

"The [global epidemic](#) that drove everyone online resulted in the perfect storm of addiction, depression and pure terror for parents attempting to raise their children in a world that is like nothing they have seen before," said Wertalik. "Social media platforms have become the forefront of life for our [younger generations](#), whose addiction to those platforms have grown exponentially in the past decade."

"I firmly believe it is not just the company, Meta, but rather everyone's responsibility to take control of social media usage, enlist guidelines and parental controls and take back the power," Wertalik said.

"I believe education is needed. If the lawsuits result in money paid to the states, I would hope the outcome would be funding for programs. School systems need to receive funding to address social media awareness, empowering and educating children about [online platforms](#) and their impact at the earliest possible age."

"The American Psychological Association has recommended, based on research, has recommended that parents recognize that children's developing brains can be especially vulnerable to some social media

features. Parents should both monitor and guide their children's social media use and model reasonable social media interactions for their children," Wertalik said.

Online initiative [Voices of Privacy](#), which Wertalik co-hosts, also has [resources](#) for parents.

Complex hurdles for the states' lawsuits

"Social media companies like Meta have come under a lot of scrutiny for the ways they have used algorithms to impact the lives of adolescents. However, the research on this subject is still evolving," Horning said. "For example, the American Psychological Association has stated that while parents should be thoughtful and cautious about how they deal with social media in the home, they also noted that the effects of social media on youth can be both beneficial and harmful depending on a wide number of factors."

"Many studies have found that a person's own unique personal and psychological make-up have the most influence on how they will respond to social media. In other words, not everyone is impacted the same," Horning said. "Knowing this, it's going to be challenging for the states to argue that [social media](#) has a universal influence on children or even that the impact is widespread. The research wouldn't support those claims, and as a result, these lawsuits may not win."

"A set of leaks from Meta seemed to indicate that they were aware of the role algorithms can play in influencing the [mental health](#) and well-being of young people. That doesn't help the company's case," Horning said. "One thing is certain though—the lawsuits will cause all [social media companies](#) to take notice. Even if they are not successful in the courts, you may see social companies change policies and take a more cautious approach when designing algorithms for certain younger

demographics."

Provided by Virginia Tech

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